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ABSTRACT

Two hypotheses were tested in this study: (1) that the elaborateness of children's descriptions would increase with grade level, and (2) that there would be a decrease in peripheral descriptions and an increase in central descriptions with grade level. A total of 211 kindergarten through eighth-grade students were instructed to describe an adult they knew very well. Responses were classified into nine categories representing major descriptive constructs related to person perception: appearance, routine habits and activities, personal possessions, personality, aptitudes and achievements, personal attitudes, subjects' evaluation of the adult, social roles, and comparisons (references to comparative differences between people). A multiple analysis of variance (grade by sex by nine categories) revealed significant increases in the use of five of the targeted categories by children in higher grades. A second multiple analysis (grade by sex by two categories) showed a significant increase in the use of central descriptive constructs by older children. Analysis of variance showed significant increases in the elaborateness of the categories used by older children. (Results were considered in terms of the development of person perception in children.) (Author/BJD)

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Children's Descriptions of Adults:

A Developmental View

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Running Head: CHILDREN'S DESCRIPTIONS

Abstract

Kindergarten through eighth grade students (N=211) were instructed to describe an adult that they know very well. Responses were classified into 9 categories representing major descriptive constructs related to person perception. A MANOVA (grade x sex x 9 categories) revealed significant increases in the use of five of the targeted categories by children in higher grades. A second MANOVA (grade x sex x 2 categories)showed a significant increase in the use of central descriptive constructs by older children. An ANOVA showed significant increases in the elaborateness of the categories used by older children. The results are discussed in terms of the development of person perception in children.

Children's Descriptions of Adults:

A Developmental View

Clear developmental trends in person perception by children have been found in a variety of studies (Flapan, 1968); Scarlett, Press, & Crockett, 1971; Powers & Secord, 1973; Livesley & Bromley, 1973). In describing others, children progress from concrete to abstract dimensions with increasing age as well as progressing from egocentric to nonegocentric descriptions (Scarlett, Press, & Crockett, 1971), and from behavioral to inferential dimensions in assessing motives (Flapan, 1968) and dispositions (Powers & Secord, 1971). In fact, it appears that it is not until adolescence that frequent or sustained references to traits or internal characteristics are employed in description of others (Brierly, 1966). Such a progression towards more abstract descriptions is presumed to rest on the increase in children's ability to make inferences about others' cognitive states (Shantz, 1975), leading also to an increase in children's ability to differentiate characteristics of others into several constructs or conceptual categories (Livesley & Bromley, 1973; Scarlett, Press, Crockett, 1971). The increased

number of constructs used by children suggests that as children grow older they are able to employ wider perspectives in their perceptions of others by being alert to the variety of terms in which someone may be understood.

Livesley and Bromley (1973) have documented a developmental shift in children's use of central statements, referring to stable internal states of the individual, between the ages of 7 and 8. They instructed children from the ages of 7 to 15 to describe adults and children they liked and disliked. This free description task entailed writing separate descriptions of each targeted person, which then were analyzed according to what descriptive categories were employed. Livesley and Bromley found that behavioral consistencies and personality traits (central statements) were used increasingly more often by older children and that references to appearance, identity, family, and possessions (peripheral statements) were used decreasingly with age. The researchers linked these changes to increased cognitive maturity and the greater predictability regarding others afforded the child who attends to central characteristics rather than

peripheral characteristics. The adaptivity of the individual in social contexts would be a natural result of attending to central characteristics of others, instead of mere superficial characteristics.

Interest in the current study arose from the aforementioned research of Livesley and Bromley. It was felt that using American subjects and incorporating a somewhat broader range of ages of the children would present additional evidence regarding developmental trends in descriptions. As opposed to Livesley's and Bromley's interest in descriptions of both adults and children, in this study interest focused upon the child's perceptions of adults and, therefore, upon descriptions children from kindergarten to eighth grade could give about adults. Since children in kindergarten and early elementary school do not have the ability to write extensive descriptions, an interview format, wherein an adult elicits oral descriptions, was chosen. An advantage of oral descriptions with any age child over written descriptions is that the child's description is less subject to variations in writing ability. Whereas Livesley and Bromley (1973) found that the number of

references made by their subjects increased with age, this apparent increase could be due to the greater writing facility of older children. A further advantage is that an oral free description may come closer to the natural, more spontaneous occasion upon which a child expresses perceptions about others than does the more formal writing situation. The child is less likely to revise and reconsider the descriptions that are presented. Thus, there is the possibility of attaining greater ecological validity in oral interviews that more closely approximate the natural process of social cognition. Disadvantages to the oral interview, however, include the possibility of influence by the interviewer, and the child's awareness of the tape recorder, itself. These disadvantages, of course, are potentially present in all interview techniques, even when the interviewers maintain strict adherence to objective questioning. Given the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, the decision to use open oral interviews was ultimately determined by the lack of writing skill in the youngest subjects.

Livesley and Bromley developed 32 regular categories for children's perceptions based upon the responses

received in their writing. In the current study, those categories were reduced to nine, because it was believed that the oral descriptions would be briefer than written descriptions, and, therefore, would have too many null categories. The fewer categories employed in analyzing children's responses the greater the reliability of the raters of the responses is likely to be. The fine discrimination of Livesley's and Bromley's categories was not considered necessary to the study at hand.

Based upon prior research, two main hypotheses were developed regarding the children's responses: (a) Peripheral references would decrease and central references would increase with age, and (b) elaborateness of the descriptions (as measured by the number of categories used) would increase with age. Further interest centered upon the specific categories of responses, but, since these particular categories had not been investigated in other research, no specific hypotheses were advanced.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 211 kindergarten through eighth grade children enrolled in a university laboratory school; the

sample excluded a small group of students in a special education class. The school maintains a carefully structured cross section of the population of the town in which it resides. For research purposes, a careful representation of occupations, income, race and ethnic background of the community is maintained in that setting. The town is composed of a typical distribution of small town, nonindustrial occupations, including occupations associated with a university; approximately 65% of the town are White, 33% Black, and 2% other minority. The mean ages for each grade, kindergarten through eighth, are 5 years 7 months, 6 years 9 months, 7 years 9 months, 8 years 5 months, 9 years 3 months, 10 years 7 months, 11 years 9 months, 12 years 6 months, and 13 years 8 months, respectively.

Procedure

Each child was instructed to describe an adult that she or he knew very well. The instructions and the children's answers were recorded for later transcription. Non-leading prompts were used when the child had completed the original description, in order to encourage as much elaboration as the child was willing to make.

These prompts took the form of statements such as, "Can you tell me anything more about that person?" If the child did not elaborate on the description, no attempt to generate further descriptions was made. Two trained female interviewers interviewed equal numbers of males and females in each grade, so that there was a counterbalancing of any effects associated with the personalities of the interviewers.

The transcribed descriptions were read and responses were classified by two trained observers who were unaware of the hypotheses associated with the study. Each of the nine descriptive categories were based upon a reduction of the categories used by Livesley and Bromley (1973). Interrater reliability in classifying the responses was computed to be .86. The categories were as follows:

Categories for Children's Descriptions

1. Appearance: References to external qualities, such as body build, facial characteristics, and size.
2. Routine habits and activities: References to typical activities engaged in by the person described, such as, "he smokes a lot", "she goes to school", "he works all the time."
3. Possessions: References to items owned by the

individual.

4. Personality: References to personality traits, temperament, characteristic reactions, behavioral consistencies, aspirations, motives, expectations, wishes, fears, and feelings about situations. Examples in this category are wide-spread: "excitable", "quiet", "makes a lot of excuses", "hollers", "wants to move to another city", "is afraid of snakes", and "always reads the paper".
5. Aptitudes and Achievements: References to mental and physical skills and capacities, successes and failures in activities associated with ability or skill; for example, "she's very smart", "he's a good fisherman", "she's a good driver".
6. Attitudes: References to likes and dislikes, values, ideals, self-esteem, self-beliefs of the person, such as "doesn't like television", "enjoys going to parties", "is very religious", "thinks he is a good worker".
7. Evaluations: The subject's evaluations of the person described. References to desirability or appropriateness of the person's behavior. For example, "good", "nice", "terrible", "lazy", "interesting", "boring".

8. Social roles: References to group and organizational membership, occupational role, or other clearly observable social role such as "mother", "businessman", "teacher", "belongs to the country club".

9. Comparisons: References to comparative differences between the person and any other people or ideals. For example, "she is the prettiest", "he is taller than my father", "he is more fun than anybody else".

In order to test the hypothesis that there would be a decrease in peripheral and an increase in central descriptions with grade level, the nine categories were pooled. Peripheral descriptions were judged to be those from categories 1 (appearance), 3 (possessions), 8 (social roles), and 9 (comparisons); central descriptions were the combined responses from categories 2 (routine habits and activities), 4 personality), 5 (aptitudes and achievements), 6 (attitudes), and 7 (evaluations).

In order to test the hypothesis that the elaborateness of children's descriptions would increase with grade level, the total number of categories employed by the children were used, regardless of how many responses were placed in each category. In other

words, a category was counted the same whether the child employed it once or several times.

Results

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed for the first 2 of the 3 analyses; ANOVA was performed in the third analysis.

Analysis 1: Comparison among all categories

A 2 x 9 x 9 (sex x grade x specific categories) MANOVA was performed to determine any grade level trends in the specific kinds of categories used by the children. There was a significant multivariate main effect for grade level, using Wilks Lambda, $F(8,193)=4.47$, $p < .001$. There was no significant multivariate main effect for sex, nor a significant multivariate interaction.

Significant univariate effects for change over age were found for 5 of the 9 categories: Routine habits and activities (2), $F(8,193)=2.61$, $p < .01$; Personality (4), $F(8,193)=2.06$, $p < .041$; Attitudes (6), $F(8,193)=2.44$, $p < .015$; Evaluation (7), $F(8,193)=6.63$, $p < .001$; Social roles (8), $F(8,193)=2.58$, $p < .011$. All significant effects showed increases in the use of categories in later grades.

Insert Table 1 about here

Analysis 2: Peripheral versus Central Comparison

A 2 x 9 x 2 (sex x grade x peripheral vs. central) MANOVA was performed to test the hypothesis that there would be a rise in central descriptions and a fall in peripheral descriptions with grade level. There was a significant multivariate main effect for grade level, $F(8,193)=2.74$, $p < .001$. There was no significant multivariate main effect for sex, nor a significant multivariate interaction.

A significant univariate effect reflecting increases in central descriptions in later grade levels was obtained, $F(8,193)=5.03$, $p < .001$, but there was no univariate effect for changes in peripheral descriptions. Table 2 shows the obtained means, demonstrating the general increase in category use in later grades.

Insert Table 2 about here

Analysis 3: Elaborateness of descriptions

A 2 x 9 (sex x grade) ANOVA was performed to test

the hypothesis that the elaborateness of the descriptions would increase with grade level. A significant effect for grade was obtained, $F(8,193)=4.70$, $p<.001$ confirming the hypothesis; there was no effect for sex and no significant interaction. Means for the male and female responses in each grade are shown in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

The consistent finding of grade level or age trends in all of the investigated areas of children's descriptions confirms the general expectations associated with this study. A developmental trend was revealed in five of the nine categories, four of which were elements comprising almost all of the categories in central descriptions. Inspection of the means obtained in the significant categories (see Table 1), however, shows that some of the categories (e.g. routine habits--number 2) had very few responses associated with them, even though statistically there was a significant trend. It is difficult to say what sort of trend actually is present when so few responses occur. Additionally, in

the case of category 8 (social roles), while there is a significant trend statistically, the changes in the mean number of responses in this category given at any age may not be meaningful. The most clear developmental trends can be seen in categories 4 (personality), 6 (attitudes), and 7 (evaluations) where more responses in each category are generally associated with advances in grade level.

When individual categories are pooled into peripheral and central categories, a much more apparent developmental trend emerges. Central constructs are employed at a greater and greater rate from kindergarten to eighth grade. Eighth grade students employ almost four times as many central constructs as the kindergarten students. Since the present analysis concentrated upon overall grade level changes in descriptions, no attempt was made to test statistically for the oft-cited developmental shift between the ages of 7 and 8 in children's uses of central constructs (Livesley and Bromley, 1973). However, a close inspection of the means in Table 2 reveals some evidence for the possibility of a shift occurring between the first grade (6 years 9

months) and the second grade (7 years 9 months). This mild shift in the use of central constructs is not sustained in the third grade, where responses are at the same level as in the first grade. If there is a meaningful shift in category use in this study, it occurs between the third (8 years 5 months) and fourth grade (9 years 3 months); in this case the upward shift in the number of central constructs is maintained.

Further indications of some relatively rapid shift between the third and fourth grades can also be seen in the means of the peripheral constructs. Even though there was no statistically significant rise in the use of peripheral constructs, the upper grades (fourth through eighth) as a unit have a somewhat higher mean number of peripheral responses. Since Livesley and Bromley (1973) reported a decrease in the use of peripheral constructs in their subjects, this mild shift upward in the current study is not consistent with their findings. As possible reason for this may lie in the differences between oral descriptions in this study and written descriptions, as used in the Livesley and Bromley study. The use of peripheral statements is more

prevalent in this study possibly because of the more spontaneous, less reflective, nature of oral descriptions in general.

The final comparison, elaborateness of descriptions as reflected by the number of categories employed, shows another clear developmental trend. Except for the drop in the elaborateness of descriptions employed by the eighth grade students, there is a steady, gradual increase in elaborateness as children reach higher grade levels. It is reasonable to expect that anyone, not merely a child, will tend to prefer certain constructs in providing descriptions and will tend to use those constructs frequently. It is unlikely that someone would exhaust the number of constructs or categories, even when providing a detailed description. Thus, we should expect to see a limited number of categories in use at any age. This, in fact, appears in the data collected. There is a movement towards using more categories, but there also seems to be an upper limit on the number of categories that would be used, accounting for the apparent levelling off of the number of responses given. Of additional note (Table 3), is the shift in mean number of categories used

between the third and fourth grades. Except for the drop in categories at the eighth grade, there is no other point where the means differ from grade to grade by as much as at these grades.

Overall, the observed developmental trends in types of categories, centrality of categories, and elaborateness of categories are consistent with prior research. The notable exception in this study is the apparent shift in centrality and elaborateness occurring at ages somewhat higher than previously observed. Further scrutiny of this shift is in order, including the possibility that there may be more of a linear growth of descriptive categories and constructs than has been evidenced in other studies.

A linear trend in the development of person perception constructs would challenge some prevailing notions regarding the pivotal role of cognitive tages in determining the quality and extensiveness of social cognition in children. Social cognition could be explained in terms of social learning phenomena, wherein the child gradually develops more internal (central) and elaborate ways of describing persons, based upon

observation of models who employ such constructs in daily life. When there are no clear, stage-like shifts in person perception obtained in children's descriptions, this explanation of gradually emerging, adaptive perceptions of others becomes a persuasive way to interpret changes.

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Author Notes

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Table 1

Means of Kindergarten through 8th Grade

Responses in Significant Categories

		Categories				
Grades	n	Routine Habits	Personality	Attitudes	Evaluations	Social Roles
K	11	.18	.91	.55	.00	1.09
1	23	.09	1.91	.09	.17	.96
2	25	.00	2.88	.36	.36	1.12
3	23	.04	1.87	.35	.26	1.09
4	23	.39	2.91	.61	.39	1.17
5	27	.00	2.89	.33	.96	1.22
6	26	.77	2.38	1.00	.69	1.58
7	28	.07	2.82	.96	1.18	1.07
8	25	.00	3.64	1.56	1.00	.88
Total	211	.17	2.59	.66	.62	1.14

Table 2

Grade Means for Peripheral and Central Categories

Grade	n	Categories: Central	Categories: Peripheral
K	11	1.64	1.82
1	23	2.43	1.96
2	25	3.76	1.76
3	23	2.57	1.70
4	23	4.35	2.26
5	27	4.33	2.41
6	26	5.08	2.35
7	28	5.14	1.96
8	25	6.20	2.28

Table 3

Mean Number of Categories Used for Each Grade

Grade	n	Male	Female	Total
K	11	1.60	2.83	2.27
1	23	2.33	3.00	2.57
2	25	2.33	2.92	2.64
3	23	2.50	2.62	2.57
4	23	3.12	3.00	3.09
5	27	3.39	3.00	3.26
6	26	3.65	3.22	3.50
7	28	3.68	4.00	3.79
8	25	2.93	3.50	3.16

Note: Maximum score = 9.